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ABSTRACT

The author of the "Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language" responds to two areas of criticism of the textbook: its size and its intended audience. These aspects and the general construction of the book are discussed in relation to the information needs of the foreign language learner and in comparison with the information available in a dictionary. It is concluded that there is no one obvious or ideal method of presenting the grammar of any language, and that while a comprehensive grammar may be unnecessarily large even for most native speakers, it is useful to have a range of grammatical descriptions for teaching purposes. It is also agreed that the choice of text should be based on the needs of the language learner rather than based on the size of the reference. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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SPEAKING OF GRAMMARS: IS BIG BEAUTIFUL?

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ABSTRACT

Some reviewers of A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language have chosen to comment on two aspects of the book: its size and potential readers. In this paper these two issues are discussed in relation to dictionaries and the different needs for information about the grammatical structure of English, in particular the needs of the foreign learner. Speaking of grammars, big is not always beautiful; nor are even big grammars adequate when it comes to accounting for the native speaker's grammatical repertoire.

It is now just over a year since the publication of our Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (Quirk et al. 1985). The reviews I have seen have so far appeared mainly in the daily and weekly press. Two features about this publication have tended to be singled out for comment by the reviewers: one is the size of the book, the other its market, ie. its potential readers and usefulness.

The amazement at the size of the book is a recurrent feature. It started with the appearance of our first grammar in the early seventies, A Grammar of Contemporary English (GCE). At the outset of this undertaking we had in mind a smaller volume, a kind of 'Survey Zandvoort'. So had the publishers, obviously. As the manuscripts landed on the editor's desk, each successive version tending to get bigger and bigger as the book was taking shape, she chose to refer to it as "the pregnant brick". When delivered in 1972 it numbered 1120 pages.

The second big grammar, which was originally meant to be an updated and revised edition of the first, and about a third longer, proved to be almost twice the length, 1779 pages in a larger page size. Since it also turned out that we felt the plan of GCE to be a strait-jacket in view of the major changes we wanted to introduce, the new book also got a new name, A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, or CGEL for

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short, but commonly referred to with a more user-friendly abbreviation: The Comprehensive.

In his review for Times Literary Supplement, John Sinclair estimated the weight of The Comprehensive at about 5 pounds, whereas "GCE weighs in at a mere 3 pounds". And he concludes: "if you want to hit anybody with a book, this is it". To be honest: the publishers also make a point about size in saying on the publicity blurb: "the largest, most definitive grammar of English ever written".

Of course, size is highly relevant in that there is a practical need for a comprehensive description of English, today the most important international language with some 300 million native speakers and some 400 nonnative speakers - and hundreds of millions more who want to learn it. Then interest in English seems to be increasing at an enormous rate. This was vividly brought home to me in 1985 when I spent a five-week period in the Far East, most of the time lecturing in Shanghai. At just one of the 20 universities in that one city, the English Department with a staff total of 246 had 10,000 students enrolled; in the whole of China there are 50 million students of English. When I asked a staff member why English was considered s important that all science students should have to take it, the reply was: "If you want to be on top in science, you have to know English". Needless to say, this intensive international interest in English requires solid information about the structure and use of all aspects of the language, including its grammar. Whereas it is difficult to find - and perhaps indeed to justify - among native speakers of the language a parallel urge to study grammar, foreign learners tend to accept this onerous task, if not with enthusiasm, at least with a sense of understanding for its importance to anyone who wants to master a foreign language.

Among questions that are commonly asked about grammar we find the following two: "Does a grammar of English have to be so big" and "If a description of English grammar requires so much space, how is it possible for the ordinary native speaker, let alone the foreign student, to internalize all this information?" The popular view is that a language is mainly made up of words, and most people are aware of all the new words that keep entering their language as a result of the introduction of new techniques, the streamlining of computer jargon, the spread of various pop cultures, and the like. Furthermore, in the common practice of lexicographers, words rarely drop out of dictionaries but have plenty of sisu and tend be long-lived, following the maxim: "Once a word, always a word". As a consequence of this, the word-stock of the language gets bigger and

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bigger. This is a fact that is accepted by the public at large who indeed understand the lifelong need for the learning of new words - hence the notion that a language is made up of words.

But does the grammar, too, have to get bigger all the time? There are of course voluminous grammars other than The Comprehensive but most of them, like Jespersen's Modern English Grammar, include a historical dimension lacking in our book, which can be said to account, by and large, for the grammatical repertoire of today's educated native speaker. Of course, the word "repertoire" includes neither competence in grammatical analysis and terminology ("putative should", "zero plural", "discourse reference", etc.), nor familiarity with all listed items (eg. desideratum/desiderata), nor indeed acceptance of all statements concerning stylistic value or level of acceptability such as the queried acceptability of ?the(ir) arrival for a month but the unacceptability of *the(ir) action in a nasty manner. The chief reason why The Comprehensive is bigger than GCE is not that the language has changed or grown in the interim 14 years but that we have more to say about the structure of English, mainly as a result of the intensive international research work that this language is being subjected to. Educated native speakers have a competence in the use of the language at least approaching the collection of descriptive statements made in The Comprehensive, whereas they do not, and indeed would not themselves claim, to have anything like the competence to be found in the collection of entries with meaning definitions of a dictionary of comparable size such as Webster's Third New International Dictionary (2662 pages), The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1550 pages), or Longman New Universal Dictionary (1158 pages).

At a conference like this which is devoted to Applied Linguistics it will be appropriate to ask the question - even if we cannot provide an answer to it: "How is it possible, if we are to believe our authorities, for a native five-year-old who can neither read nor write to have internalized the basic grammar of Enigish?" And can a nonnative learner ever hope to approach this kind of native competence which comes to almost 1800 pages in print? But before tackling the foreign learner's problems, let's just consider to what extent even a grammar that claims to be "comprehensive" adequately accounts for the native speaker's repertoire.

I believe we have to admit that, in some respects, even a big grammar like The Comprehensive can only be said to scratch the surface as a representation of the knowledge of a native speaker. For an illustration of this inadequacy we may choose the categorization of the word-stock of the

language into word-classes. In The Comprehensive there are two classes: closed and open. The closed class includes prepositions, pronouns, determiners, conjunctions, modal verbs, and primary verbs; the open class includes nouns, adjectives, full verbs, and adverbs; in addition we list two lesser categories: numerals and interjections. Within most of these major word classes, subdivisions are made in the book, such that, for example, the most important noun classes (see section 5.3) are "common" (toy) and "proper" (John) and "common" further subclassified into "count" and "noncount", both of which may be either "concrete" or "abstract" (pig/pigs, difficulty/difficulties; butter, music). However, this division is far too rough and ready, too "indelicate", for many purposes. In addition to these noun classes, further subclassification is therefore made in various places in the description, for example:

animate/inanimate:
The girl (*door) said...

material:
that concrete floor, That floor is concrete (7.14)

measure:
several gallons of water (5.8)

evaluative:
My back is aching, darling (*computer) (10.53)

eventive:
The meeting (*boat) will be tomorrow (8.76)

general:
The latest (thing) is that he is going to run for re-election (7.26)

gradable:
He is clearly a dangerous man (8.101)

variable/invariable:
dog, dogs; gold (5.74)

locative:
the world's economy (5.118)

modal:
Anna's willingness to do (*of doing) the job (17.36)

pejorative:
a clever liar ≠ That liar is clever (7.36)

quantitative:
several million inhabitants (5.89)

temporal:
a moment's thought

Yet, even the last subclass, "temporal nouns", is too coarse for a description of English usage, as can be seen in the matrix shown in Table 1 (from Crystal 1967:54) displaying the privileges of occurrence of different nouns appearing in prepositional phrases denoting time. Most of the uses in the figure will be familiar to a native speaker of English - perhaps not to a five-year-old but let's say to the educated adult speaker. The matrix shows that temporal nouns which, at a first glance, may seem similar (such as afternoon, night, winter, instant, nighttime) behave rather differently in prepositional phrase constructions, for example:

in that afternoon (*nighttime)
on an afternoon (*night)
in the winter (*instant)
at that instant (*night)

Although the chapter on prepositional phrases includes a large number of such expressions, it has to be admitted that The Comprehensive provides an inadequate description even for a fairly central grammatical category like time expressions. Grammars are particularly wanting in such information that does not readily lend itself to systematic statements: whereas the case system of a language like Finnish can be exhaustively stated in the morphology section of the grammar, we are less likely to find a correspondingly full account of the prepositional system in another language like English where similar relations are expressed by means of prepositions.

This is of course an area where there is overlap between grammar and lexis, and we would expect to find the required statements in the dictionary. However, even if there should be such a dictionary, and there probably will be in the future, the alphabetical organization of the dictionary can hardly replace the type of systematically organized and presented information that we shold find in the grammar. In a case like the one illustrated here, however, I know of no dictionary that will give the adequate information. In particular, the links between the grammar and the dictionary are too weak, so that it is not obvious how the search for such information should be coordinated. Incidentally, we can learn one more thing from Crystal's figure: the question marks, denoting uncertainty, personal variation in acceptability etc., should be taken seriously and thus be interpreted as legitimate fuzziness rather than incompetence in the native speaker. (It is a curious fact that we, as foreign teachers of English - and certainly our students - somehow expect English to be fully

Table 1. Nouns in prepositional phrases denoting time (from Crystal 1967: 54.

	in a *N* or two	in that *N*	in the N_{sg} (no postmodification) [**)]	in a *N* (no postmodification) [**)]	in ∅ N_{pl} (no postmodification) [**)]	in ∅ N_{sg}	∅ N_{pl}	on the N_{sg}	on a N_{sg} (no postmodification) [**)]	on ∅ N_{pl} (no postmodification) [**)]	on ∅ N_{sg}	at that *N*	at the N_{sg}	at ∅ N_{sg}
afternoon	+	+	+	+	–	–	+	+	+	+	–	–	–	–
evening	+	+	+	+	–	–	+	+	?+	?+	–	–	–	–
weekend	+	+	?+	+	–	–	+	+	?+	+	–	+	+	–
night	+	+	+	?+	–	–	?–	+	–	– [**)]	–	–	–	+
morning	+	+	+	+	–	–	+	+	–	– [**)]	–	–	–	–
Monday...	+	–	–	–	–	–	+	+	+	+	+	–	–	–
January...	?+	+	+	+	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
hour	+	+	+	+	?–	–	–	+	–	–	–	+	+	–
minute	+	+	–	+	+	–	–	+	–	–	–	+	+	–
second	+	+	–	+	+	–	–	+	–	–	–	+	+	–
day	+	+	+	+	–	–	–	+	–	– [**)]	–	–	–	–
summer	?+	+	+	?–	?–	+	?+	–	–	–	–	–	–	?+
winter	?+	+	+	?–	?–	+	?+	–	–	–	–	–	–	?+
spring	?+	+	+	?–	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	?+
autumn	?+	+	+	?–	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	?+
month	+	+	+	+	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
week	+	+	+	+	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
year	+	+	+	+	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
decade	+	+	–	+	?+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
century	+	+	–	+	?–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
fortnight	+	+	+	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
instant	+	?+	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	+	–	–
moment	+	?+	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	+	–	–
lifetime	–	?+	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
daytime	–	–	+	–	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
nighttime	–	–	+	–	–	+	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

[*)] Excluding stylistically marked (e.g. humorous, nonce, poetic) uses.
[**)] I.e., to exclude 'on a night like this', 'in the decade preceding the revolution', etc.
[***)] Except in the restricted sense of 'morning-shifts', etc.

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clear and rule-bound, while we could hardly claim this for our own native language, be it Swedish or Finnish.)

The second aspect mentioned by our reviewers concern potential uses of the grammar. The Times reviewer, Philip Howard, concludes by saying:

> It is a prodigious undertaking. It is just a bit difficult to see who it is for, other than other writers of English grammars. You would be ill-advised to try to learn English from it.

The point that grammarians write for each other is interesting, and probably true to the extent that an important and particularly valuable amount of feedback is provided by our fellow grammarians who write reviws in the professional journals and send us some "private communication" (as the footnote term goes). If the readers of our books were all grammarians there must be a lot of them out there, judging by the sales. Who are our potential readers, then? Well, The Comprehensive is certainly not a "teaching-grammar" in the usual sense that we employ the term in our schools and universities. It is a comprehensive reference grammar to be used by those who know enough about the structure of English to be able to make good use of it. This highlights one of the weaknesses of grammatical presentation. There is no one obvious, let alone ideal, method of presenting the grammar of English - or any other language, for that matter. If all of us here in this room were to write a grammar of English - Heaven forbid - there would probably be as many different grammars as there are people in my audience. If we were, each of us, to write a dictionary, there would be differences in the choice of words and some variation in the order of material within the entries, but I think we would, by and large, be able to use all the dictionaries and we would at least agree on the alphabetical order. In grammar there is no obvious order, let alone content, outside the standard statements on morphology - which there is not all that much to say something about in English anyway.

It is my guess that many foreign students buy the big grammar just because it is big, just as they will buy a big dictionary - to be on the safe side. Big is felt to be not only beautiful but good for you. I think that we, as applied linguists, have an important role to play in giving advice to teachers and students about the different needs here. Speaking of grammars, we need different sets of grammars: grammars adapted to the needs of beginners (although that information may not be presented in a proper grammar-book) and of secondary and advanced students; we need grammars for specific purposes, not so much because there are specific

rules for such sublanguages but in order to create motivation by using the appropriate language illustrations; we need grammars for automatic analysis and parsing; we need contrastive grammars for foreign learners and we need usage grammars for native speakers. It was with the aim of satisfying some of the different needs that the "Survey team" split up into twosomes and produced grammars in addition to the big ones: A University Grammar of English and A Communicative Grammar of English. For accounts of some aspects of our work, see the separate papers (all forthcoming) by Greenbaum (on The Comprehensive), Crystal (on the Index of The Comprehensive), and Svartvik (on A Communicative Grammar of English).

In concluding, I would like to say that "an English grammar" is an abstract representation of one linguistic level of the language. In view of the different linguistic theories and potential uses, there is not, and cannot be, one generally accepted or acceptable mode of selecting content and form of presentation. A grammar of English that claims to be comprehensive has to be big since the grammatical structure of the language is complex and requires, at least with our current knowledge, a vast apparatus. Yet, even a "comprehensive grammar" cannot be said to account for the total linguistic repertoire of the native speaker; in particular, we find it difficult to grasp how a "naive" native speaker can internalize this amount of information. For language teaching it is important not only to have a range of grammatical descriptions to choose from but also to consider carefully the choice that is appropriate for a particular learner of English.

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